

# A Tale of Two *Bridging Families and*

*Two innovative programs in Belgium promote both educational quality and equity as they reach out to ethnically diverse families.*

**Orhan Agirdag  
and Mieke Van Houtte**

**B**oth the quality and equity of schools depend greatly on the quality of the relationships among teachers and students' families and their communities. However, few educators or policymakers can clearly answer the question, How can schools effectively reach out to ethnically diverse parents?

In Belgium, as elsewhere in the world, many interventions aim to bring schools and parents closer to each other. Two such projects are the *Brugfigurenproject* (Bridge Person project)

in the city of Ghent and the *School in Zicht* (School in Sight project) in the city of Antwerp. We focus on these two projects not only because they are relatively successful and thus may set an example, but also because they target different demographics. The Bridge Person project aims to reach socially disadvantaged (mostly immigrant) families, whereas School in Sight primarily focuses on middle-class families. The programs share the same objective: to create more equal opportunities in education.

## **From Two Major Challenges...**

After World War II, Belgium rapidly developed into a multicultural society, with substantial numbers of immigrants coming from southern Europe, Turkey, and North Africa. However, today these immigrants are mostly members of socially disadvantaged groups in Belgium. The country's increased ethnic diversity poses two major challenges.

## ***The Immigrant Achievement Gap***

The school-based achievement of immigrant students—even that of second- and third-generation students—remains far behind the achievement of their native Belgian peers. In fact, this achievement gap in Belgium is one of the highest among all developed coun-

GHENT





ANTWERP

# Cities *Schools*

tries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). For this reason, educators and policymakers in Belgium are exploring ways to increase immigrant students' academic performance (Agirdag, 2009, 2010).

One approach is reducing the social and cultural distance between the school and immigrants' families. Schools often reflect the culture of the socially advantaged families they serve; they rarely correspond with the cultures of immigrant or low-income families (Ogbu, 1982). Consequently, immigrant families tend to be less connected to schools than native Belgian middle-class families are. In addition, as opposed to ethnically diverse educators who might be more knowledgeable about how to communicate with and involve ethnically diverse parents (Sleeter, 2001), teachers in Belgium rarely have an immigrant background.

## **School Segregation**

Compared with other Western countries, school segregation in Belgium is extreme. We calculated that in multicultural cities in Belgium, approximately 84 percent of native Belgian students are enrolled in schools in which they constitute the numerical majority. This situation is linked both to historical evolution and to the structural charac-

teristics of the Belgian education system (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009).

Historically, immigrants have usually lived in particular districts within the larger cities in which industries were located. This led to a concentration of immigrant students in certain schools—namely, those that traditionally enrolled low-income Belgian children. These schools then experienced “white flight”; that is, native Belgian parents decided to enroll their children in other schools because of the increasing number of immigrant students.

In addition, in the Belgian education

system, the assignment of students to schools is not regulated by place of residence. Parents are free to choose or avoid certain schools. Middle-class parents tend to avoid schools with a high proportion of low-income and immigrant students, even if these schools are in their neighborhood (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009).

## **Toward Two Solid Solutions**

### ***Bridge Person Project***

Established in 1997 by local authorities in the city of Ghent, the Bridge Person project addresses the first of these



challenges—the immigrant achievement gap—by creating meaningful relationships between schools and socially disadvantaged families. Bridge people (*brugfiguren*) play a central role. Every elementary school in Ghent whose student body consists of more than 50 percent socially disadvantaged students may employ a full-time bridge person. The city covers the cost (Op den Kamp, Van Gyes, & Desmedt, 2007).

The bridge person, as the name implies, constitutes a bridge between families and the school. Many bridge people are from Turkish or North African backgrounds; in addition to speaking Dutch and French, they may speak Turkish, Arabic, or one of the Berber languages and thus are able to communicate with immigrant families. Although some have a teaching background, this is not required. Rather, the selection of bridge people is based on their social, communication, and organizational skills as well as their experiences within the community. Most bridge people have experience as social workers. They receive initial coaching by three project coordinators and further training through the education counseling service of the city of Ghent.

The first set of activities that the bridge person engages in is directed toward families. These include

- *Making home visits.* Most bridge people try to visit the homes of all newly enrolled students. Parents may initiate a visit in the event they have a concern about their child; teachers may initiate a visit if they notice that a student's parents rarely attend parents' evenings at which teachers and parents



**A bridge person talks with parents outside school.**

discuss individual students' progress.

- *Organizing school visits for parents.* Typical school visits in Ghent are the so-called "coffee-drinking moments," which are organized weekly. During these informal meetings, parents (mostly mothers) converse about school topics of interest.

- *Providing basic social service support* for families, such as help with completing forms.

- *Translating documents.*

- *Encouraging parents to take part in regular school activities,* such as conversing with teachers when parents drop off their child at school in the morning and attending parents' evenings and various end-of-year activities.

The bridge person is also responsible for carrying out activities that focus on the teachers. These include

- *Informing teachers about the causes and consequences of social disadvantage in education and improving their attitudes toward ethnic and social diversity.* Some bridge people organize formal discussions, some invite guest lecturers on various topics, and some prefer informal meetings with teachers during the day.

- *Providing information about students' home situations.* When the parents of a

student fail to attend parents' evenings, a teacher might erroneously think that they are not interested in the education of their child. Their absence may, however, be due to a work-related or financial problem; the bridge person could communicate this to the teacher.

- *Providing feedback and advice concerning teaching approaches,* such as how to validate students' linguistic diversity and use it advantageously in the classroom. Teachers tend to welcome such

feedback, especially when it comes from the more experienced bridge people.

- *Translating during school programs* organized for parents.

A small-scale investigation of the effectiveness of the Bridge Person project revealed increased trust between parents and teachers, growing involvement of parents in schooling, and increased teacher understanding of poverty and the varied causes of underachievement. Originally, the Bridge Person project was established as a temporary initiative. However, because of its overwhelming success, the local authorities have decided to provide financial support for the program through 2014.

The project has been successful for three reasons.

- *Independence of the bridge person.*

Because city authorities cover personnel costs, the bridge person is financially independent of the school administration. This guarantees that a bridge person can function independently, even though he or she works closely with the school team. Such independence facilitates further communication between parents and schools, especially

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ORHAN AGIRDAG



in situations where parents are experiencing conflict with teachers.

*Ethnic match between families and the bridge person.* Local candidates—that is, people from the immigrant communities—are given priority for the bridge person positions. This match is especially important when the parents are not proficient speakers of Dutch and the bridge person can function as a translator.

*Commitment to go beyond deficit thinking.*

Many interventions focus on families' supposed deficits; they assume that immigrant or low-income parents are less involved in schooling because they lack interest in or knowledge of the education system. A core task of a bridge person is to make teachers aware of their own potential biases so they understand the complex reality socially disadvantaged students and their families face.

### **School in Sight Project**

The main goal of the School in Sight project is to achieve desegregation by bringing more middle-class students into schools that enroll a majority of low-income and immigrant students. In Belgium, segregated schools—that is, schools that enroll a majority of immigrant students—are commonly called *concentration schools*, which is a pejorative term. Indeed, the public often perceives these schools as synonymous with low instructional quality and weak academic performance. This negative association is one of the main reasons middle-class parents avoid schools with a high share of ethnic-minority students. Because being able to choose—and thus avoid a school—is a



**A bridge person reads with a young immigrant student.**

constitutional right in Belgium, the only option left that might promote desegregation is voluntary action.

On one hand, many open-minded, middle-class parents would like to enroll their children in a concentration school but are afraid to do so because they believe that their children will be socially isolated. On the other hand, many school principals and teachers in concentration schools would like to serve a more socially and ethnically diverse student body but do not know how to attract it.

Established in 2007 by a group of committed parents in the city of Antwerp, the School in Sight program provides information for middle-class parents about the assets of concentration schools that may encourage them to enroll their children (Albertijn & Smeyers, 2009). This information is primarily disseminated through their website ([www.schoolinzicht.be](http://www.schoolinzicht.be)) and through various social-networking sites. Moreover, School in Sight is regularly covered in the national media.

Many of these schools provide more quality than the public commonly perceives. For instance, Belgian concentration schools receive much more

government funding than other schools do. Class sizes in these schools are usually much smaller, which makes personalized learning more feasible. Moreover, the more middle-class families that enroll, the greater the likelihood that their children will not be socially isolated.

One major thrust of the program is countering “point-of-no-return” thinking. That is, many school principals and teachers believe that once their school becomes a concentration school,

there’s no way back. It’s encouraging for school administrators to look at examples of schools that have successfully achieved more mixed student bodies by presenting their advantages to the public.

School in Sight has quickly proved successful. In three years, 18 schools in Antwerp have participated. As a result, more than 100 middle-class students have enrolled in concentration schools. More important, because these families tend to have strong networks, more middle-class parents have been inclined to follow their example.

Three crucial factors explain the success of the School in Sight project:

*Evidence-based approach.* The bulk of research points out that ethnic concentration is only harmful when accompanied by socioeconomic school segregation (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, in press; Ryabov & Van Hook, 2007). Project administrators have explicitly chosen to focus on the socioeconomic dimension, unlike most desegregation approaches that focus on the ethnic dimension.

*Voluntary action.* Neither participating schools nor parents were forced to join

this project. This voluntary approach is in strong contrast to early desegregation attempts in the United States, in which students were bused to schools outside their neighborhoods in an attempt to create more integrated schools. Such a policy has often proved fruitless and even detrimental to the achievement of ethnic-minority students (Armor, 1995). Parent and school support for such projects is much stronger when the parties involved have learned about the benefits of desegregation.

## Parents do not choose a school in a social vacuum, but consult other parents and share experiences.

*Collective action.* The School in Sight project aims to bring a *group* of middle-class parents into contact with a concentration school and thus does not focus solely on individual parents. This collective approach not only decreases barriers, but also reflects a more natural enrollment process. Indeed, under normal circumstances parents do not choose a school in a social vacuum, but consult other parents and share experiences.

### Possible Pitfalls and Solutions

For the Bridge Person project to succeed, the bridge person needs to focus on the teacher- and student-focused activities that his or her job entails. One danger is that in the absence of available personnel, the school may wish to use the bridge person to handle day-to-day problems. For instance, the bridge person is not meant to accompany students on school trips, track student absences, correct tests, or monitor payments from parents. It's important to communicate to the school that the bridge person has a tightly mapped job description and needs to work to some extent independently from the school team.

An important challenge for the School in Sight project relates to what happens after the desegregation process. Some studies have pointed out that immigrant students might experience decreased education aspirations and increased chances of peer victimization in desegregated schools (Agirdag, Demanet, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2010; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2010). Moreover, middle-class parents might also have more demanding expectations of teachers; they may, for example,

request more frequent feedback about the progress of their child. It's wise to brief teachers on how to deal with a more heterogeneous student body and their parents. Such a briefing might touch on cultural differences across social class lines, plurilingual education, or religious diversity (Agirdag, 2009).

### From Two Cities to the World

Both the School in Sight and Bridge Person projects are good examples of how to bridge families and schools. However, they still operate as local projects—that is, they are not yet embedded in the regular national school policy, nor do they serve schools outside Ghent and Antwerp. With the support of policymakers, similar projects can be implemented elsewhere in the world where schools and families face similar challenges. ■

### References

- Agirdag, O. (2009). All languages welcomed here. *Educational Leadership*, 66(7), 20–25.
- Agirdag, O. (2010). Exploring bilingualism in a monolingual school system: Insights from Turkish and native students from Belgian schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(3), 307–321.

Agirdag, O., Demanet, J., Van Houtte, M., & Van Avermaet, P. (2010). Ethnic school composition and peer victimization: A focus on the interethnic school climate. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

Agirdag O., Van Houtte, M., & Van Avermaet, P. (in press). Why does the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of schools influence math achievement? The role of sense of futility and futility culture. *European Sociological Review*, doi: 10.1093/esr/JCQ070.

Albertijn, M., & Smeyers, M. (2009). *School in zicht. Tien lessen uit drie jaar werken aan desegregatie in het onderwijs* [School in Sight. Ten lessons from three years working on desegregation in education]. Antwerp: Tempera.

Armor, D. J. (1995). *Forced justice: School desegregation and the law*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2006). *Where immigrant students succeed: A comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003*. Paris: Author.

Ogbu, J. U. (1982). Cultural discontinuities and schooling. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 13(4), 290–307.

Op den Kamp, H., Van Gyes, G., & Desmedt, E. (2007). *Beroepsprofiel Brugfiguur in het Basisonderwijs* [Professional profile of bridge-persons in primary education]. Leuven, Belgium: HIVA.

Ryabov, I., & Van Hook, J. (2007). School segregation and academic achievement among Hispanic children. *Social Science Research*, 36(2), 767–788.

Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94–106.

Van Houtte, M., & Stevens, P. A. J. (2009). School ethnic composition and students' integration outside and inside schools in Belgium. *Sociology of Education*, 82(3), 217–239.

Van Houtte, M., & Stevens, P. A. J. (2010). School ethnic composition and aspirations of immigrant students in Belgium. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), 209–237.

**Orhan Agirdag** (orhan.agirdag@ugent.be) is research officer and **Mieke Van Houtte** (mieke.vanhoutte@ugent.be) is lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Research Group CuDOS, at Ghent University, Belgium.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.